

Mild Traumatic Brain Injury: Lost and Found

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For 16 years I have been a Family Physician, the first ten primarily in solo practice in Michigan. In 1996 I moved to Colorado to work for a non-profit HMO so I could spend more of my time doing what I loved, preventive medicine and patient education activities. I had just spent a rare 5-day recreation weekend at a friend's mountain cabin at Grand Lake. On the drive back to Longmont, I decided a few ski runs in the fresh powder at Winter Park would be a great end to the trip. On my first run I fell backwards, hitting my helmeted head on the icy ground under the new powder and "rang my bell." Little did I know that this accident, which seemed minor at the time, was the beginning of a new journey for me.

Despite being an active, prevention-oriented Family Physician, I had no idea of the implications of Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI), or the consequences of repetitive MTBI. Here I have chronicled several examples of my "Lost and Found" along the way.

Lost: Control

At my first cognitive therapy appointment, my therapist told me "If you are used to being in control, get over it!" I am used to being in control, and accustomed to working hard to accomplish the goals I have set for myself. One of the most difficult battles in this brain injury recovery process continues to be giving up being in control. I continue to work on learning to ask for help more often, going with the flow, and relaxing more. None of these are easy changes for me, but I'm making progress.

Found: Great Friendships

My best friends did not wait for me to ask for help; instead they let me know they had time and were willing and able to be available when I needed them. They would call when they were planning to run errands and ask whether I wanted to go along, or wanted them to do something for me. At other times they would call and say they had free time, and encourage me to use their services in whatever way I needed assistance on the days they had available. Several of my patients regularly offered to help with transportation, which led to opportunities to get to know them better. One friend has repeatedly lamented that although for my sake she is hoping I am able to drive soon, she is going to miss our riding time together. It has been a great experience.

Lost: Auto Pilot

In the past I took for granted my ability to take off and go, or just do things at the spur of the moment. Now if I go without significant advance planning I usually forget things I need, or forget things I planned to do on my trip away from home. I am definitely not as good at on the fly thinking or planning.

Found: Preplanning Skills

Being the Physician-In-Charge of a 10-provider office demanded that I be good at preplanning before my MTBI. Now, every time I leave home it involves an even higher level of advance preparation in order not to forget things I need to take along and to have adequate time to get myself ready. My rehabilitation doctor calls me a bag lady, because I always carry a backpack. By packing my backpack the night before with the things I will need, and putting it by my front door, I never panic if my ride shows up early, or the time I allow for getting ready is not adequate. Also, in packing the night before, I don't forget things I need. I even have different backpacks for different activities, giving me an organized place to store the items needed for those activities. This strategy allows me to prepare in advance and leave my house with minimal stress.

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Lost: A Sense of Time

The management of time is causing me significant problems since my brain injury. In the past I could very accurately plan the amount of time necessary to get ready, and I prided myself on always being on time. Now, to be on time requires a preparation period that is twice as long as previously required. The minutes seem to fly by, and suddenly I am running late. Without the use of my hourly watch chime, my watch alarm, my Palm Pilot's alarm function and my microwave timer, I would not be able to get through a day accomplishing anything. When cooking, I need to set my microwave timer to remind me to watch what is on the stove, because turning away for a second, followed by a minor distraction, can lead to major cooking disasters. I also find I need to set alarms to remind me to go to bed at night.

Before my brain injury, fatigue was the signal that it was bedtime, but now that signal would send me to bed for much of the day. Also, my speed of completing activities is slower, so I cannot rely on gauging passing time by the amount of time it takes me to finish a task. I've found myself replying to e-mails at 2 a.m. because it seemed that only a little time had passed since starting to deal with my e-mail messages.

Found: Quality Time

Even though the hours seem to disappear into thin air, I find that I am taking the time to enjoy moments in the day more than I did before my brain injury. I tell friends that this has been a wake up call, a reminder to stop and smell the roses. The sad thing for me is that it has taken two wake up calls, the first five years ago when my mother, a young and healthy 61 year old, died of traumatic brain injury as the result of a fall in our family home.

My habit has been to rush from here to there, and often try to do two or three things at the same time. I was missing a lot, letting life pass me by unnoticed. Now I stop and really listen to others, enjoying what they have to say. I also enjoy more sunrises and sunsets, as well as the beautiful views along my walks or bike rides. Occasionally I even just sit and relax with my eyes closed, something I never did before my injury.

Even though I am frustrated by some of my losses, and hope and anticipate gaining back the "Losses," the "Founds" have added richness to my life. Many people who have brain injuries say as they are recovering that they will never be the same as they were before their injury. I think that is true, but many of us believe we will be better!